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ABSTRACT

This paper documents the efforts of Albuquerque Technical Vocational Institute's (TVI) Trades and Service Occupations Department to recruit and support women in nontraditional occupations. Nontraditional careers are defined as those occupations in which women comprise less than 25 percent of the population. While women are entering professional fields such as law and engineering at significantly higher rates than 20 years ago, this report cites that women are not entering nontraditional occupations such as electrician, truck driver and mechanic. While nontraditional occupations pay better, both external obstacles, such as discrimination and sexual harassment, and internal obstacles, such as a lack of self confidence, serve as barriers to women workers. In an effort to successfully increase and integrate women into nontraditional programs, TVI has implemented several strategies at the organizational and educational levels. They provide gender and diversity training to faculty and staff in addition to sexual harassment training. The department also formed a support group for women students in nontraditional fields in order to discuss sexual harassment, support services such as childcare, and employment strategies. While there is a lack of longitudinal data on the effects of these initiatives, positive results have been documented anecdotally. Contains 11 references. (SKF)

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Breaking Barriers:
Women in Nontraditional Programs

Joseph J. Rodman, Dean **Paula L. Fisher, Associate Dean**
Albuquerque Technical Vocational Institute
Trades & Service Occupations Department
525 Buena Vista SE
Albuquerque, NM 87105-4096

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JOSEPH J. RODMAN

Native New Mexican, born in Raton home of the Fireballs (sugar shack). Studied Trade and Industrial Education at Colorado State College. Senior Dean at Albuquerque Technical-Vocational Institute, A Community College since December 1984 to present.

Interested in Malcolm Baldrige, Steve Covey, and Edward Deming's philosophy and methods and how they might be integrated into the community college and the teaching/learning environment.

Experience as an automotive technician, community college faculty member, chair, division head, director at Pikes Peak Community College, Pueblo Community College, and San Juan Community College.

Loves fast cars--1955-59 Chevrolets, big block Corvettes, country western dancing with wife Sandra and spoiling his three grand children Nichole, Erica and Damon.

PAULA L. FISHER

Born in Long Beach, California. Completed coursework for a California teaching credential in 1974. Has worked as a teacher, real estate agent, painting contractor and all around entrepreneur. Began a five-year electrician's apprenticeship program at the age of 32. Upon completion of the program continued work for several years as a journey-level electrician. Began teaching within the apprenticeship program and eventually joined the administrative staff responsible for curriculum development and continuing education classes for more than 700 electricians. Has worked with numerous school districts, colleges and apprenticeship programs to promote and recruit women into nontraditional occupations.

Received an MA in Vocational Education from Cal State Long Beach in 1996. Moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico, remodeled her house, worked at Home Depot and joined the staff in the Trades & Service Occupations Department at the Albuquerque Technical Vocational Institute, as Director of Employer Based Programs. Became Associate Dean in the department in 1998.

Breaking Barriers: Women in Nontraditional Programs

For over 20 years various programs have been initiated at the federal, state and local level to encourage women into nontraditional, higher paying occupations. The primary impetus has been to support economic self-sufficiency for women. There is a perception in American society that women have made great strides in the workplace and that they are now represented in significant numbers in all types of occupations. However, the actual numbers indicate that gains for women are primarily in the professional occupations. Women attorneys increased from 19.3% in 1988 to 21.4% in 1992 (DOL, 1993). The number of women engineers increased from 7.3% in 1988 to 8.5% in 1992 (DOL, 1993). Whereas, numbers of women in occupations such as electrician, telephone installer, truck driver and auto mechanic have dropped or not increased significantly in 20 years of affirmative action (DOL, 1993). At present, the vast majority of young women are being trained for low wage/low skilled jobs, rather than high wage/high skilled positions. The National Commission on Working Women, of the group Wider Opportunities for Women, reports that 70% of female secondary vocational school students are enrolled in programs leading to traditional female jobs which are low wage, low skilled fields (US Department of Labor, 1993).

Nontraditional occupations for women are defined as occupations in which 25% or less of the population is female (US DOL, 1991). Generally, nontraditional occupations pay better, are career oriented, and include formal skill training. In 1991, the median weekly earnings for all women workers were $315 per week, while the earnings for construction workers averaged $554 (US DOL, 1991).

Many community colleges across the U.S. have committed to making equity and diversity in the classroom a priority by initiating recruitment strategies and increasing enrollment numbers for women in nontraditional programs. In many ways, the implementation of the Carl Perkins Act of 1984, the Applied Technology Education Act of 1990, and the Nontraditional Employment for Women Act of 1991, served as a means to increase enrollment of women in nontraditional programs and provide an awareness for gender equity. However, increasing enrollment percentages does not guarantee success. Once a diverse population is recruited, do community college leaders, faculty and staff expect them to act like the status quo? Retention programs specifically designed to meet the needs of a diverse population must be created to ensure success for all students.

Prior to initiating retention programs, it is important to understand the unique barriers women face upon entering or considering a nontraditional program or career. Studies have been conducted to examine these unique barriers. Yuen's research in 1983 concluded that women are faced with internal as well as external barriers when choosing to follow a path of a nontraditional career. External barriers include not only the qualifications required to enter programs, but also the attitudes communicated by parents, peers, school personnel and employing agencies. Yuen also found that internal barriers relate to how women feel about themselves which is created by the socialization of traditional female roles, family values, peer pressure and lack of self confidence.

Attitudes of peers, parents, school personnel, and employing agencies can either deter or encourage a woman to enter the nontraditional classroom or occupation. A Burge and Sandell study in 1988 indicates that females who have entered a nontraditional vocational classroom have been encouraged and supported by a close male friend or father. Some of these same female students also chose not to pursue a nontraditional occupation because of either a lack of self-confidence or a desire to please a future spouse who did not support that choice.

A 1989 study by Haignere and Steinberg examined the effectiveness of training programs to prepare women for nontraditional occupations. One conclusion of the study indicated that attitudes of future employers and even vocational educators had to change. A double standard exists. A man and a woman each complete automotive mechanics training and are entering the same job environment. The " attitude" greeting these two individuals is easily summarized: "He's new. Let's see if he can do it." "She's new. I'll bet she can't do it" (p. 343).

Women have not been educated to enter nontraditional occupations. Since females have historically been discouraged from pursuing these types of careers, they have not been encouraged to take courses in math or science (Green, 1993).

When considering entrance into a male dominated construction program or trade, females must deal with the internal barriers related to social or cultural upbringing. Sex-role stereotyping can create and maintain barriers. Self-concept can be important in influencing the successful pursuit of a nontraditional career. Burge and Culver, 1985, conducted a study to examine the differences in the self-concept of students grouped according to their sex and the sex-intensiveness of their vocational program. The study concluded that the males, as a whole, had more positive attitudes about themselves, yet the females enrolled in nontraditional programs had significantly higher self-concept scores than males enrolled in nontraditional programs. This might indicate that higher self-concepts are needed for any students choosing to enter nontraditional programs.

If and when a woman enters a nontraditional classroom or job site, she is likely to be either the only woman or one of a small number of women present. Crocker and McGraw's 1984 study on solo-status, indicates that classmates' or co-workers' perceptions of a solo individual can be distorted through increased visibility. Increased visibility means more attention is given to the individual. They tend to be objects of curiosity and fascination, which can lead to increased performance pressure.

A woman in a nontraditional program or on a jobsite may be doubted, joked about, or questioned by male co-workers or classmates as to why they are there. How a woman deals with this type of behavior may be indicative of her success or failure. Some researchers believe that sexual harassment is a fact of life for almost all women in construction. LeBreton and Loevy's research completed in 1992 concluded that sexual harassment is a significant factor in why women leave the trades. The study indicated that a woman knowing that she will face some form of sexual harassment is a condition

that most women would not chose and so is a defining barrier to women entering the trades.

Barriers experienced by a majority of students at community colleges can also be a hindrance to the retention of female students in nontraditional programs. Financial barriers, lack of child care, transportation issues, and academic deficiencies coupled with the internal and external barriers women face entering and completing a nontraditional program provide community college leaders, staff and faculty with a challenge.

It is the responsibility of community college leaders to encourage equality and diversity within a framework of quality, therefore enhancing the educational experience. Providing a comfortable, positive atmosphere within classrooms, labs, hallways, and offices will better enable students to reach higher levels of academic achievement and life long learning.

The Albuquerque Technical Vocational Institute's (TVI) Trades & Service Occupations Department provides over twenty-two certificate or associate degree programs considered nontraditional to females. The recruitment and retention of women in nontraditional occupations has been a goal of the department for several years. In 1991 female enrollment was 20.05%. This number has increased significantly to 27% in 1999. Retention figures by gender have not been kept since 1991. To accurately document improvement in retention strategies, it is vital that data is collected and analyzed.

Creating an environment which values differences is not something that happens automatically. To create such an environment, an awareness of the unique barriers women face upon entering programs is imperative. The Trades and Service Occupations department has provided gender diversity awareness training to faculty and staff. It is believed that awareness training does not happen just once. It needs to occur on a yearly basis intertwined with support strategies. Instructors are encouraged to discuss gender and cultural differences in the classroom to foster an understanding and value of differences. Sexual harassment prevention training should be included in all curriculums for students to gain a better understanding of their roles and behavior in the classroom and on the job site.

Some instructors spend time with new students addressing their fears of starting a new occupational program. This can be accomplished by having students anonymously write down their fears on paper and placing them into a box that is passed around. When completed each piece of paper is pulled out and read out loud. The fears are discussed, not the individuals who wrote them, in a caring supportive environment.

Administrative leadership is vital to the success of any program. Behavior speaks louder then words. A commitment must be made to hire faculty, staff and administrators whom reflect the diversity of the student population. In 1997, the first female administrator was hired in the Trades & Service Occupations department. The visibility of a female administrator has provided an avenue for female students to voice their concerns. Women represent only 3% of the over-all faculty for the Trades & Service Occupations

Department. It will take a greater effort to recruit female faculty skilled in trades' occupations because the percentage of women in skilled trades is low.

Besides providing training each year in gender/ethnicity issues and enforcing policies against sexual harassment in the classroom, the department has formed a support group for women in trades. This support group was formed by women for women. Female faculty, administrators and students participate in the group. The group meets once a month to discuss issues such as:

- Sexual harassment; What is it? What is the law? What keeps me from speaking up?
- Support services, how to deal with childcare, transportation, family issues and hold down a construction job.
- How to interview for a nontraditional job, tricks of the trade.

This group provides an opportunity for women to support one another, to know that there is support on the administrative level and especially to not feel isolated. Since this group began, women have sought out support when they might otherwise have quit. Many times these women do not speak up. Some women are hesitant to talk to their male instructors about childcare issues, out of a fear that it might seem trivial. A female student may not ask the name of a tool because it is assumed that everyone knows.

One female automotive student in her final term was going to quit because of a lack of financial support. She came to the female administrator who in turn went with her to the instructor. The instructor was very supportive and they were able to arrange a paid cooperative education experience for the student. She was able to complete her certificate and has continued in employment.

Another student was having a difficult time finding childcare. She discussed this in the support group. Another student, who was taking classes later in the day, was able to help out. They now provide childcare for each other.

"Women in Trades" was formed in 1997. At this time statistics relating to the retention of females in the Trades Department has not been conclusive. The immediate results are found in the success stories cited above and the fact that faculty members are now referring their students to attend the support group. It is the intention of the department to continue this support group and expand it with alumni as more students graduate and enter the workplace.

The trades department displays photos and posters of women in nontraditional occupations, produces three newsletters a year always including stories and photos of women in trades, and continues to provide awareness training to faculty and staff in a supportive, non- threatening atmosphere. Community college leaders must set the stage for the students and help to guide faculty and staff to provide a quality environment to foster success for all students.

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Milwaukee Nontraditional Feeder Program: A "How to" Resource Guide. Wider Opportunities for Women, Inc. 815 15th St, NW, Suite 916 Washington, DC 20005. (202) 638-3143